



RAJ'A

RAJ'A (lit.: “return”). Abu'l-Ḥasan Aš'ari (q.v., d. 935) introduces this concept in his work *Maqālāt al-eslāmiyin* as a belief held by a large majority of the “Rāfeza”—which in this context means Imami Shi'ites (Aš'ari, p. 46; on the term in general see Kohlberg, “Rāfiḏa”). In his *Ketāb al-entešār*, the Mu'tazilite Ḳayyāt (d. between /902 and 912) also attributes this doctrine to the *Rāfeza*, all the while adding that the latter conceal it from non-Shi'ites (Ḳayyāt, p. 95). It is true that in theological or heresiographical works, expressions such as *raj'iya*, *ahl al-raj'a* and *aṣḥāb al-raj'a* (i.e., those who believe in *raj'a*) in almost all cases, designate Imamis in particular, and the different Shi'ite movements more generally. Imami doctrinal works do indeed lean toward this direction (Faḏl b. Šādān, pp. 381 ff.; Ebn Bābawayh, pp. 88 ff.; Mofid, pp. 13 and 50 ff.; Majlesi, LIII, pp. 39 ff.) although information remains discrete, as noted by Ḳayyāt. E. Kohlberg has already dedicated an excellent study to this concept (Kohlberg, “Radj'a”). The present study will therefore mainly reiterate the concept in its broader terms while summarizing and nonetheless provide additional information where required, including other sources and more recent studies that have since been published.

The term *raj'a* “return,” sometimes known as *karra*, pl. *karrāt* (meaning “return” as well, but also “that which returns,” “that which repeats often,” hence, “cycle”) has had many meanings according to the context in which it was professed.

Let us first consider a quasi “spiritual” interpretation of the term the return of the soul, after the perishing of the body into another body, or the



transmigration of the spirit of a saintly person or *wali* (more specifically, of an Imam) into another body. This kind of “return,” designated by the terms *holul* or *tanāsok*, was denounced by heresiographers as a highly deviant belief and attributed by them to “extremist” (*gāli*; pl. *golāt*) Shi‘ite sects (ps-Nāši’, pp. 27 ff.; Nowbakhti, pp. 33, 80, 89-90 ; Sa‘d b. ‘Abd-Allāh Qomi, pp. 45 and 107; Rāzi, p. 311). Two clarifications must however be made to this information. First, the distinction between “moderate” and “extremist” Shi‘ites is a later development. At any rate, it seems artificial regarding early Imamism as it appears based on the most ancient sources that have come down to us. All the theories and doctrines attributed by the heresiographers to the *golāt* are encountered in one form or another in the corpus said to be “moderate,” in this case the oldest compilations of Twelver Shi‘ite Hadith. Moreover, almost all of the major figures of Shi‘ite “extremism” were, directly or indirectly, the disciples of Imams. Many among them, “cursed” by an Imam, find themselves in the entourage of the following Imam; which seems to indicate that the “public condemnation” (*la‘n, barā’a*) was no more than a “tactical means”—quite regularly practised in esoteric circles—to divert external threats (Amir-Moezzi, 1992a, pp. 310-17; 1992b, pp. 229-42). Next, regarding the transfer of a spirit from one Imam to another, careful examination of the texts seems to demonstrate that it is more precisely a matter of transmission of the “Light of Alliance /Divine Friendship” (*nur al-walāya*) from one *wali* to another. In this particular case, *raj’a* is not concerned with the transmigration of the soul but the passage of saintly light from one person to another. The phenomenon is also designated by many other terms such as *naql* (“transfer, transport,” *taqallob* (“reversal” or else the passage from one “mortal coil” [*qālab*] to another) and finally *tanāsok*, which in this specific case is not a process of *metempsychosis* but rather of *metemphosis* (Komayt, p. 69; *Nahj al-balāga*, no. 93, p. 279; Amir-Moezzi, 1992a, pp. 109-10). This kind of Return is said to pertain to the imams no doubt, but also to certain revolutionary Shi‘ite thaumaturges such as ‘Abd-Allāh b. Mo‘āwia, Bayān b. Sam‘ān and Moğira b. Sa‘id (Tucker, 1975a; 1975b; 1980; Halm, 1982).

Alongside this “spiritual” meaning, “return” has many other “corporeal” interpretations in which the eschatological dimension occupies a central place. First, it designates the *wali*’s emergence from occultation (*gayba*) in order to (re-) establish justice and wisdom. This motif of return, after quite a long period of absence, of a saviour prevailing over death is derived from Mazdeism and Judaism, both well-known to the Arabs, even before the advent of Islam (Friedlaender, 1909, pp. 23 ff.; 1910, pp. 10-15; Şadiqi, p. 165, n. 2). The



second caliph 'Omar b. al-Kaṭṭāb (r. 634-44) had already refused to believe in the death of the Prophet, claiming that the latter had (re)-entered occultation, as had done Moses before him (Aš'ari, p. 15; Malaṭi, p. 14). Some groups among the sect of the Saba'iya as well as some among the Kaysāniya, most likely a twin sect of the former (van Ess 1974-75, *passim*), respectively professed the occultation of 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb and his son, Moḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiya, who was not a son of the Prophet's daughter Fāṭema, and their return as eschatological saviour, to restore justice upon earth (al-Qāḍi 1974, index and 1976, pp. 299-301; van Ess 1991, pp. 306-309). The different Wāqefiyya sects of one or another Imam also applied these beliefs to their guides. The *Imāmiyya*, which had become the *Eṭnā'ašariyya* from the first half of the 10th century (Kohlberg, 1976) were the main inheritors of these ancient beliefs and applied them to the one whom they revered as the Twelfth and final Imam—their *mahdi* and *qā'em*, Moḥammad b. Ḥasan 'Askari. Among Twelver Shi'ites, this interpretation of *raj'a* is more often designated by the term *zohur* ("manifestation") or still *kōoruj* (literally: "exit," here in terms of a rise against injustice), moreover, this event will be projected to the "End of Time" (*āk̄er al-zamān*) (Modarressi 1993; Arjomand 1996). In this context, the Return occurs to provoke an armed "rise" against the forces of evil and ignorance. Hence the appellation *qā'em* or Mahdi, one of whose meanings is "the Standing One," i.e., "he who rises" to fight injustice in contrast to other Imams called *al-qā'ed*, literally "the Seated," i.e., he who has not been commissioned an armed uprising. Refusal to accept death of the hero, faith in his occultation and return to definitively conquer evil are all themes also encountered within a number of revolutionary and millenarian movements that punctuate the Omayyad and 'Abbasid periods, like the Moḡiriya and the Bayāniya (whose eponyms we have already cited) or various groups of followers of emblematic figures such as Behāfarid, Bābak "Korramdin," or Abu Moslem (Melikoff, chap. 4; Laoust, index; Šadiqi, chaps. 1 and 6; see also [ABU MOSLEM KORĀSĀNI](#)).

Still in eschatology, *raj'a* may have the following meaning: at « the end of time » return to life of a certain number of deceased individuals, more specifically, Friends of God (prophets, saints and Imams), victims of injustice and cruelty as well as their tormentors, in order that the victims might avenge the criminals. This represents the general idea of such a conception of *raj'a*, but there are many divergences regarding the details depending on the different movements that profess them. According to some traditions, this Return to life will occur just prior to the advent of the Mahdi, others have it coincide with this event, still others place it after (e.g. Majlesi, LIII, pp. 39 ff.; see also



Sachedina, pp. 166 ff.). According to almost all of the texts, this “particular resurrection” (*ḥašr k̄āṣṣ*), as differentiated from the great universal Resurrection (*ḥašr ‘āmm* or *raj’a ‘amma* – universal Return), concerns only the pious and impious of the Muslim community, whereas other reports, much more rare, mean the event to imply the good and evil of religious communities prior to Islam. Finally, according to the heresiographers, certain “extremist” sects professed that *raj’a ‘amma* designates the return to life of all the deceased prior to the Resurrection (Ps-Nāšī, pp. 27 ff.; Šahrastāni, I, pp. 165 ff.; II p. 17). There is also difference of opinion regarding holy figures and their executioners that return to life. However, in the mass of often contradicting Hadiths, some names are encountered more frequently: ‘Ali (appropriately called “the lord of returns,” *šāḥeb al-karrāt* ; cf. e.g. Borsi, pp. 210 ff.) and his enemies, in particular his assassin Ebn Moljam, Jesus-Christ and his tormentors, the enigmatic Koranic prophet “Esmā’il, faithful to his Promises” (“Esmā’il, šādeq al-wa’d”; cf. Qur’ān 19:54-55) and then especially Imam Ḥosayn, victim and martyr par excellence, whose vengeance seems to have been a necessary condition to purge the Islamic community of the worst crime it committed in order to prepare it for the final Resurrection (Ebn Qulawayh, chap. 19, pp. 65 ff. and chap. 50, pp. 136 ff.; Majlesi, LI, pp. 77-78 and LIII, pp. 101-17; also Crow, 1986, *passim*). Thus, before obtaining their reward or eternal punishment, the persecuted saints will avenge themselves of their persecutors, or rather the Mahdi will be the instrument of their vengeance, by killing or mutilating the latter.

Imami interpreters of the Qur’ān base this belief on verses such as 2:243 and 259 17:6 24:55 27:83 and 28:5-6 Similarly, the eschatological term *ma’ād* (literally: “return to the origin”) of verse 28:85 is interpreted in this way (‘Ali b. Ebrāhim Qomi, *sub* 28:85; Ṭusi, I, pp. 254 ff.; II, p. 283; VIII, p. 120; Ṭabresī, I, p. 257; II, p. 270; XX, pp. 251 ff.). Moreover, a Shi’ite reading of verse 3:185 adds to the text of ‘Oṭmān’s Qur’ān codex: “Every soul will taste death” (*kollo nafs dā’eqat al-mawt*) the phrase “and will return to life” (*wa manšura*), an expression that is interpreted as alluding to *raj’a* (‘Ayyāši I, p. 210, no. 169; Ḥelli, p. 17; regarding the “Shi’ite Qur’ān” and studies pertaining to it, now see Amir-Moezzi, 2002, pp. 722-25 and n. 1 to 3).

With the emergence and domination of the rationalist theological and juridical tradition during the Buyid period (Amir-Moezzi, 1992a, pp. 15-48) certain Imami thinkers seem to have accorded the concept of *raj’a* a purely political connotation, namely the return to power in the hands of the Shi’ites during the



reign of the Mahdi (‘Abd-al-Jabbār, pp. 177-85; Jāhez, I, p. 24). However, this rationalisation of the concept, which occurred most likely under the increasing influence of Mu‘tazilite thought upon the dominant tradition, was rejected by the great majority of learned Imamis. The defence of the compatibility of doctrinal meaning of the notion of Return with Mu‘tazilite conceptions of human reason and divine justice even becomes a recurring polemical theme between theologians from both sides (Šarif Mortazā, I, pp. 125-26; Ṭusi, I, p. 255; McDermott, pp. 268 ff.; for more details on the actual content of these polemics, see Kohlberg, “Radj’a”).

The doctrine of Return will remain an Achilles heel – one of the most frequently referred to vulnerable points employed by adversaries of Shi‘ism to denounce the “heresies” that in their view characterise Shi‘ism. *Raj’a* is mainly presented as a doctrine supposedly foreign to Islam and borrowed from other religions, Judaism in particular. It is true that the different meanings applied to the term—from transmission of saintly light or transmigration of souls to the manifestation of a saint after a period of occultation or yet again revival of the dead before Resurrection—have a number of precedents in several Near and Middle Eastern religions (Mazdeism, Manichaeism, Judaism, Judaeo-Christian movements, Christian gnostic sects or pagan faiths, etc.). As E. Kohlberg most pertinently emphasises, it is no doubt for this reason that in his work, *al-Ši‘a fi ‘l-mizān* the late contemporary Lebanese scholar, Moḥammad Jawād Maḡniya, is obliged to state that *raj’a* does not at all form part of the fundamental principles of the Imami faith, that the concept was simply transmitted by traditional texts and it is thus permissible for the believer to either accept or reject it (Kohlberg, “Radj’a”; Maḡniya, pp. 54-55).

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